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Outstanding Undergrad Research

02.22.2007 | Science, Students, Research The University of Dayton is one of just 15 colleges in the nation named the 2007 winners of the Merck Institute for Science Education (MISE) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) award. Each award provides \$20,000 annually for up to three years for joint use by biology and chemistry departments.

Winners were selected for their approach to interdisciplinary opportunities, ability to engage students in interdisciplinary research projects and commitment to future programs with a focus on combining biology and chemistry initiatives.

"The University of Dayton is at the forefront of providing collaborative curricula for our students," said Mary E. Morton, dean of UD's College of Arts and Sciences. "The award from Merck and the AAAS recognizes our past achievements as well as our commitment to providing undergraduate research opportunities for future students. This support will engage our current undergraduates and attract additional talented students in science to the College."

Chemistry and biology students are regularly involved in conducting research, offering presentations and authoring articles as part of the UD curriculum. Chemistry students Dan Collins and Deepika D'Cunha were part of a group at UD whose undergraduate research resulted in making close to 30 new compounds using a variety of rare-earth elements. Their work was published in the journal, *Inorganic Chemistry Communications*.

"The undergraduate research I've been able to do here is critical because many graduate schools use research as a factor for admission," Collins said. "In my own applications, many graduate schools commented that my undergrad research played a major role in their decision to accept me."

Shawn Swavey, assistant professor of chemistry, led the students on this project. "The students got a chance to make something no one else had done before and characterize it afterward, using the technique to characterize compounds," Swavey said. "For undergrads, you can't ask for much more than learning new techniques. It helps them be better scientists."

For D'Cunha, the opportunity to present at conferences and co-author papers was more than just something to put on a resume. "It was a great opportunity to meet other student and faculty researchers as well as learn about some very cool, cutting-edge stuff," D'Cunha said. "Although I'm planning on going into the medical field as a doctor, it was still awesome to work in coordinate chemistry and learn a lot more about the physical side of some of the medical technology I'll have to use later on."

Yiling Hong, assistant professor of biology, said for students going on to graduate or medical school, the research experience is the most important part of their curriculum. "They learn a lot of things from the laboratory that are never covered in the classroom," Hong said. "The research experience makes them stand tall among other applicants."

UD is a leader in cross-disciplinary curriculum. In September, the University announced initiatives to support interdisciplinary research and education efforts that included plans for a new master's degree in bioengineering and the emergence of a Center for Tissue Regeneration and Engineering at Dayton or TREND. The Merck/AAAS award for undergraduate research initiatives in the biology and chemistry departments will help move UD's strategic plan forward.

"The upcoming decades will continue to see an expansion of biological- and biomedical-based challenges that will best be addressed across many fields of study," Morton said. "At UD, we educate our students to have depth of knowledge and experience within a discipline to be able to tackle research questions across the board."

Winners of the Merck/AAAS Undergraduate Science Research Program were announced during the AAAS annual meeting in San Francisco. Winners include: Augustana College, Rock Island, Ill.; Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Davidson College, N.C.; Lawrence University, Appleton, Wis.; Pomona College, Claremont, Calif.; Rhodes College, Memphis, Tenn.; St. Lawrence University, Canton, N.Y.; The College of New Jersey, Ewing; Truman State University, Kirksville, Mo.; University of Evansville, Ind.; University of Richmond, Va.; University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minn.; University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh; Wellesley College, Mass.

Launched in 2000 as a national competition, the 10-year, \$9 million initiative is funded by MISE and administered by AAAS.

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